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IN FORTNIGHTLY PARTS

The Ancestral Trail

AN EPIC STORY OF MYTHS, MAGIC AND MONSTERS

11 Klaw, Servant of Evil

Battling the Army of Bonemen

Julek Heller

UK £1.75 IR £1.75

From a story by Frank Graves

Australia $4.50 NZ $5.50 Singapore $4.95 Malaysia MYR6.95 Malta £M1.50

On the Eleventh Day . . .

Ties that bind release the one
In deepest darkness thrown.
The shortest length can longer run
By faith and faith alone.
In desert lands beneath the sun
Power of steel and weight of stone
Defy. But when the day is done
Mountain berries split the bone.

Lumps of stone tumbled into the yawning chasm as Richard landed on the other side. "Come on!" he shouted back to Orkan and Melek, as chunks of floor continued to disappear from under their feet. "If you don't hurry the gap will be too wide."

As the two jumped, the section on which they had just been standing crumbled away.

"Now," Richard warned, "we've got to move fast." The three of them leaped across the cave whose floor was now split by a crazy-paving of wide cracks.

"Up here," Richard said as they reached the other side of the cave.

A LUCKY ESCAPE

Orkan and Melek followed Richard as he scrambled up the crystal outcrops to a narrow gap in the wall. They crawled through on their bellies and emerged in a cave bigger than Zibella's. In the middle stood a huge mound.

"Let's climb up there,"

Orkan said, his soldier's eye picking out the strategic strongpoint. At the peak was a deep hole. As the three peered down into the seemingly bottomless blackness, an eerie wail echoed up the shaft. They tensed, ready to run, when the wail came again. This time they all heard its message.

"Help me!" The voice was soft, and unmistakably genuine.

Pit of perils

"How far down are you?" Richard bellowed into the shaft.

As he looked down, he saw metal spikes protruding in a spiral from the sides. They were too sharp and narrow to be of any use for climbing, more a deterrent to stop people getting out, but his mind subconsciously ticked them off. If one of them had to go down by rope, then the spikes could take some weight. The rope was only so long. It all depended on how deep the shaft was.

"I don't know. Please help me!" The answer floated up even as Richard pondered.

"What are we going to do?" Melek asked.

"The rope's not nearly long enough to reach the bottom."

"Let's see if the prophecy helps," Richard suggested. Together they scanned the ancient verse.

"It seems we should use the rope and have faith that it will be long enough," Richard said.

"Melek's the smallest," Orkan said, "he'll have a better chance of getting through the spikes."

"All right," Melek said with resignation, "but you two had better hold on tight."

Perilous descent

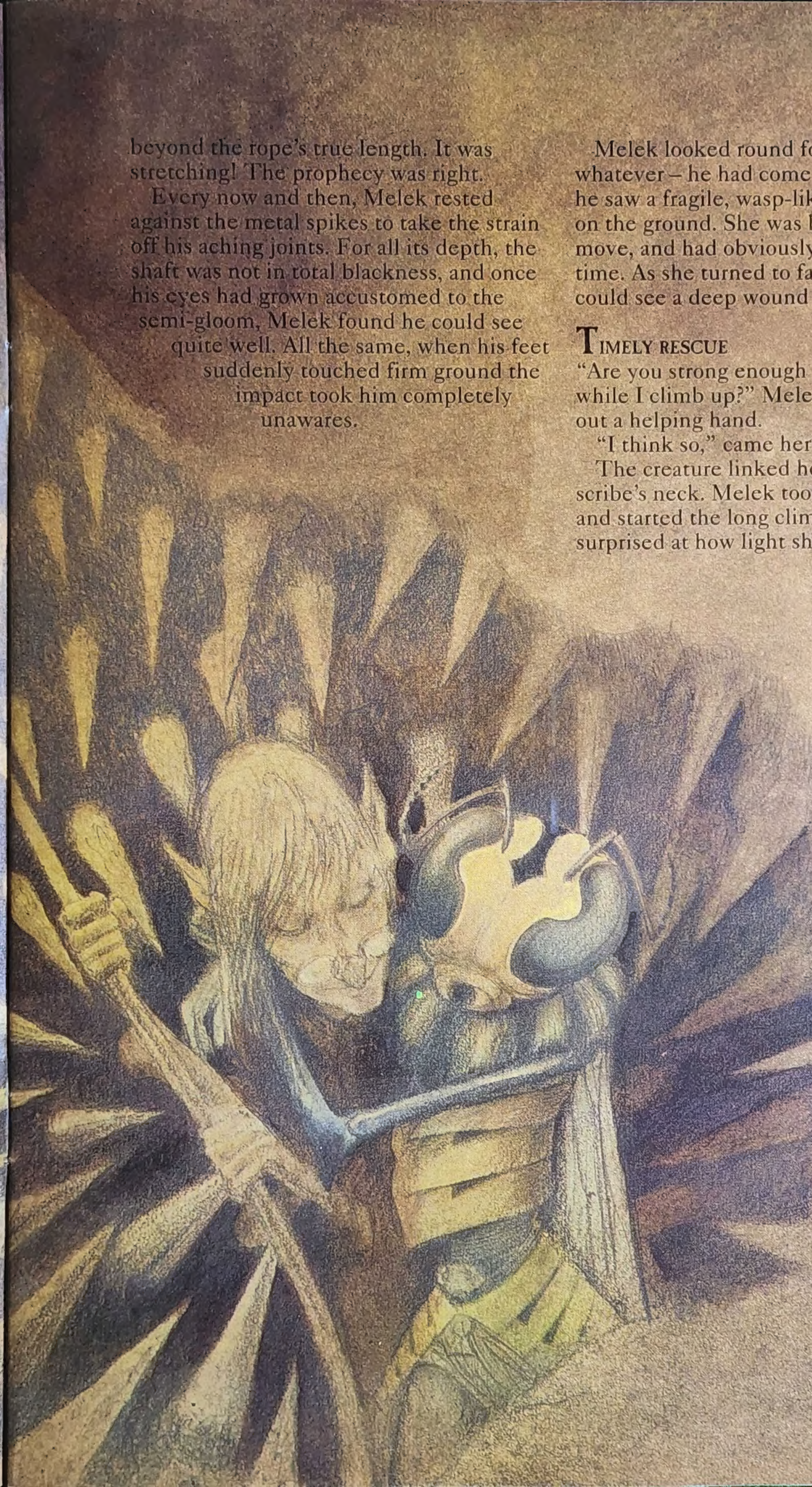
Melek handed the rope to Orkan who threw one end into the shaft. Then Richard and Orkan took the strain. Melek shuddered and, before he could lose his nerve, scrambled quickly into the gaping hole.

As he slipped hand over hand down the rope, Melek could not help feeling nervous. What if the rope did not stretch? What if his feet slipped off the end, leaving only his hands to hold him up? What if he fell? Then he remembered the words 'faith and faith alone' and scrubbed all doubt from his mind. His life depended on believing that the rope would be long enough.

A few seconds later, Melek realized he had already gone

beyond the rope's true length. It was stretching! The prophecy was right.

Every now and then, Melek rested against the metal spikes to take the strain off his aching joints. For all its depth, the shaft was not in total blackness, and once his eyes had grown accustomed to the semi-gloom, Melek found he could see quite well. All the same, when his feet suddenly touched firm ground the impact took him completely unawares.



Melek looked round for whoever – or whatever – he had come to rescue. Then he saw a fragile, wasp-like creature lying on the ground. She was barely able to move, and had obviously been there a long time. As she turned to face him, Melek could see a deep wound in her leg.

Timely rescue

"Are you strong enough to hold on to me while I climb up?" Melek asked, holding out a helping hand.

"I think so," came her weak reply.

The creature linked her arms around the scribe's neck. Melek took a deep breath and started the long climb up. He was surprised at how light she was, but even

so, the climb was hard. Several times he had to rest on the metal spikes, but he also had to avoid their sharp lethal points. The journey down had seemed long, but the climb up seemed much longer. Finally, with one last effort, Melek heaved himself over the top of the shaft and collapsed on the ground.

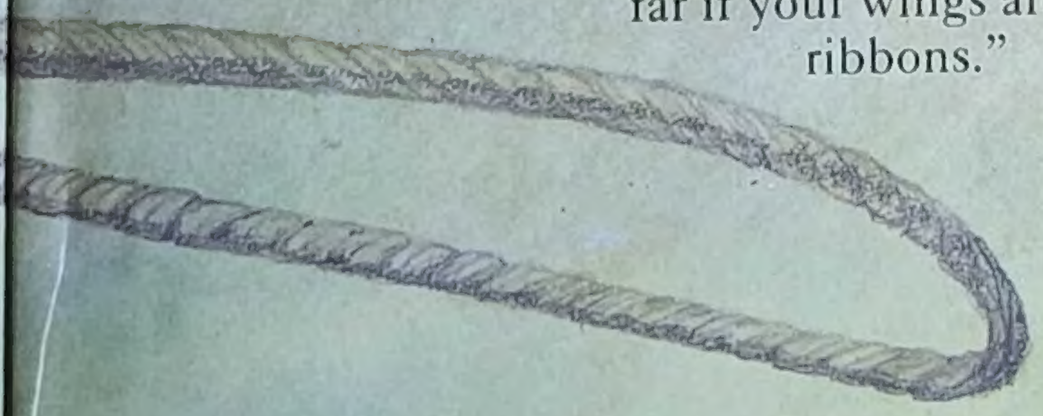
"Oh, thank you," the wasp-like

creature gasped, struggling to her feet.

"I am Kika, the Guardian of Insects. I was trapped by Klaw, the Evil One's servant. He stole my weapons and threw me into that dreadful pit to die."

"Couldn't you have flown out?" Melek panted, still recovering from his climb.

Kika unfurled a pair of transparent, gossamer-thin wings. "Remember the spikes?" she said. "You can't fly very far if your wings are in ribbons."



Melek blushed, then busied himself getting the book on to his shoulders again.

"Now, tell me who you are," Kika said turning her large, glittering eyes on each of them in turn.

Richard told her about his quest and all that had happened so far.

"I'll do what I can to help," Kika said when Richard had finished. "There is a pod in Sand City, but getting it won't be easy. Klaw will do everything in his power to stop us.

"Before we go, let me give you this." Kika untied a narrow belt from her waist and handed it to Richard.

"Its magical powers will help you when you most need them," the Guardian said.

Richard looked at the belt. It was made of a super-light silvery metal, thin and glittering. It had been wound several times round Kika's thin body, but it fitted perfectly around his waist. As he strapped it on, Richard felt a surge of strength through his body.

Hot desert trek

"Well, there's a pod in Sand City," Richard said, with renewed confidence. "Let's go."

"What about Kika?" Melek asked. "She can't walk."

"I'll carry her," Richard said, and gently lifted the Guardian on to his back.

The party made their way down the mound, and across the cavern. Following Kika's directions, they made their way through various tunnels until they emerged into the open.

They looked ahead to an emptiness of desert and scrub grass. A harsh wind blew, sending tangles of tumbleweed scurrying across the landscape. Only in the very far distance, could they see the outline of a city break the horizon.

"Straight ahead," Richard said, leading the way once more.

They trudged on wearily. The desert was hard going. Although the ground was reasonably firm, it rose and fell in monotonous ridges that effectively doubled the distance they had to travel. More than once Melek's knees buckled under him, sending him sprawling in a heap on the sand.

Richard realized how dangerous their situation was. From the ridge tops it was impossible to see beyond the next gully. And once in the gully, it was impossible to see beyond the next ridge top. The Evil One could have a whole army hidden in this desert, and they would be none the wiser until they walked straight into them.

Bone warrior

Richard halted at the bottom of the next gully and was about to speak to Orkan when an ear-splitting laugh hammered at his ear-drums.

Richard looked up at the ridge and saw a sight that sent his heart into his boots. Silhouetted against the sky was a figure wrapped in a torn black shroud. From his horned helmet and his skull-like face to

his skeletal feet, there was not one scrap of flesh to be seen. All of the creature, even the spear that he brandished aggressively in the air, looked as if it was made of bone. It could only be Klaw.

"We've got to get out of this gully," Orkan cried. "Run."

"That's right, run!" Klaw's harsh voice rang out contemptuously. "See where it gets you!" Suddenly his hand was full of bones, little chunks the size of knuckle joints, which he flung to the ground. "Nobody can escape my army."

Where Klaw's bones landed, the ridge bloomed with white. From little pegs of bony nothingness, a forest of warriors sprouted with extraordinary speed into full-grown beings. Hard, skeletal and menacing, they were slightly smaller replicas of their master.

In one hand they held broad shields, carved out of bone into identical images of skulls; and in the other they clutched short, long, thin-bladed swords of bone.

"Go, my children!" At Klaw's command the bone warriors rattled their swords against their shields, and began to march purposefully downhill.

"Back up the hill!" Orkan barked, and began to hustle the others up the slope. Just before he turned, he saw Klaw's hand go back as if he were about to throw something. At the same time Klaw gave another evil laugh.

They felt something skimming through the air above their heads. Small puffs of dust rose in front of them, as if a handful of pebbles had landed in the dirt. But they all knew that these were no pebbles. They turned and fled, as the ridge for which they had been heading began to sprout newly-sown bone warriors.

Their only avenue of escape was along the gully, but Klaw's bonemen were one step ahead of them. Already they had broken ranks and were fanning out to

block either end.

Richard looked around in despair as he realized they were surrounded. One boneman came running at him, sword raised.

Without pausing to think, Richard pulled out Juroot's dagger and hurled it as hard as he could at the boneman. It struck his enemy's head with a crunch, driving a jagged hole in his skull. The boneman tottered a few steps before collapsing in an untidy heap. Richard dashed forward and grabbed back his sword.

"We might have a chance!" he shouted to the others. "They're not as strong as they look. We might be able to fight our way out of here."

Forming a tight group, with Kika in the middle, they used swords and broken bones to battle the oncoming army.

The knot of ferocious combat drifted along the gully and up the sides of the ridges, leaving in its wake a trail of shattered bones. The weight of numbers was too great. Whenever the bonemen's ranks became dangerously thin, Klaw simply threw out more bones and a fresh squad joined the fray.

Merciless onslaught

Orkan, Richard and Melek were tiring. Their arms ached from the swinging of swords and bones. The wearier they got, the slower their reactions became. The bonemen's blows got harder to dodge and some even reached their target.

Orkan's sword-arm was numb from a lucky swipe that caught him on the elbow. He was fighting with his left hand. The *Book of Prophecies* had a large gash on its thick leather cover and there was an ugly bruise above Melek's right eye. Richard's side was bruised from a stab that had been

deflected only by his new metal belt, and his knuckles were raw and bleeding from the bony hands that grappled with his own.

"Give me your bow and an arrow," Kika called urgently to Orkan.

"They're useless at this range," Orkan shouted over his shoulder.

"Just give them to me," Kika demanded. Her words suddenly carried the full weight of a Guardian's authority.

"All right, take them," Orkan felt the undercurrent of suppressed anger that flowed through Kika's voice.

Kika plucked the bow off Orkan's back and snatched an arrow from his quiver.

Then she spread her wings. For a few seconds, she merely hovered above their heads, unable to take full flight. The bonemen's swords slashed furiously at the Guardian's fragile limbs.

"You shall not escape a second time!" Klaw bellowed with rage, as he realized the Guardian was about to fly off. He strode ahead, sweeping his warriors to either side as if they were made of paper. He raised his spear and took aim.

A FALSE FRIEND?

Kika, still hovering above the scrum, glanced at her old captor and the sight gave her strength. Her wings bit the air and she soared upwards just as Klaw's spear left his hand. It missed her by a whisker and then she was away, flying through the sky in a blur of movement. In seconds she had disappeared from sight, flying towards the distant forest.

"She's tricked us!" Orkan shouted in anger. "She's escaping and leaving us here!"

Even Richard was surprised by Kika's desertion. He had thought she was on their side. She seemed so genuine. Now his mind was full of despair. There was no doubt Kika had taken the opportunity to save

herself. Perhaps the evil rot that infested this crazy world had affected Kika more than it had Juroot. At least he had reverted to normal when he was released.

At that moment, while they were all gaping after Kika, Klaw muscled his way into the fight. With one smash, he knocked Orkan's sword from his hand. A lightning flurry of blows disarmed Richard and Melek as if they were babies.

"I might have lost the Guardian," Klaw chuckled, "but I won't lose you."

Shoomi's Sanctuary

Come into this ancient domain and use your powers of observation to find . . .

Shoomi and Shoobi

Look out for these friendly little creatures again. They are hiding somewhere in the illustrations in this issue.

In issue 10, Shoomi and Shoobi were on the inside front cover, diving into the water to escape the fire in Green Man Wood.

Monsters and Magic

Read about the Grey Claw, Dragon's Teeth and Zombies on Morbane's cards. Which of the characters do you think Klaw is based on?

In issue 10, the sorceress Zibella was based on Morgan le Fay.

The Ancestral Trail

Cut out the locator cards and tokens and keep them safe. More will be given at regular intervals. Details about the role-playing game and how to play it will appear in future issues.

Mask of Evil

3-Minute Challenge

Can you find a fragment of the Evil One's Mask in the illustrations in less than three minutes?

In issue 10, the elements for the Reversal Spell and letters of the magic word LIBERTAS were all on page 157.

Did you beat the challenge? If not, try again this time!

Megapower

A game for two or more players using your Monster Might cards.

Aim

To collect three cards with the same TOTAL megatron power score. The winner of each round keeps a note of that TOTAL score and the first player to reach a grand total of 200 wins the game.

Before you start

Shuffle cards and place face down. The player who gets the highest TOTAL megatron power is dealer.

How to Play

1 Shuffle cards and deal each player three cards.
2 Place remaining cards face down on the table and turn over the top card.
3 The next player can either pick up the facing card or take one from the pack. He must then discard one card from his hand and place it face up on the discard pile.
4 The next player does the same. Play continues until one player has three cards with the same TOTAL power score and is the winner of this round.

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© Marshall Cavendish Ltd & Frank Graves 1993 Published by Marshall Cavendish Partworks Ltd, 119 Wardour Street, London W1V 3TD
Colour by Bright Arts Ltd. Typeset Output by Litho Link Ltd. Printed in Great Britain.

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12 Scorpions of the Desert
Deadly Guards of the Sandy Fortress
Julek Heller

In Issue 12

Scorpions of the Desert

Fresh from the battle with Klaw's fearsome army of bonemen, our heroes face an even more terrifying foe – the squads of giant scorpions who guard Sand City. How will the trio fare against creatures who have a deadly sting in their tail?

plus

- Morbane tells of creatures entrusted with special secrets.
- More pieces for the puzzle map.

Coming in Issue 13

Dragora's Inner Sanctum

The search is on to find Cobra's Keep and the precious pod that lies deep within its chambers. What evil will our heroes have to face this time?

plus

From Morbane – two stories about less than saintly serpents • More playing pieces for **The Ancestral Trail** role-playing game.

ISBN 0-7485-4195-0
9 780748 541959